

# Preface

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**D**uring 2003 and 2004, I had the great pleasure and privilege of working with two fine scholars and good friends of many years, Dr. Nicholas Colangelo and Dr. Susan Assouline of the Connie Belin and Jocelyn N. Blank International Center for Gifted Education and Talent Development, at the University of Iowa, on a major report that investigated the status of acceleration in America's schools and colleges and why, despite the wealth of research that supports the use of acceleration with academically gifted students, educators are so wary of using it.

The report, *A Nation Deceived: Why Schools Hold Back America's Brightest Students* (Colangelo, Assouline, & Gross, 2004), was generously funded by the John Templeton Foundation of Pennsylvania. We developed the report in two companion volumes. Volume 2 consists of 11 chapters written by international experts on acceleration who presented the findings of many hundreds of research studies on 18 forms of academic acceleration. Volume 1 is a distillation of the principal findings of Volume 2, written to present the key facts about acceleration and the reasons for its underusage to teachers, parents, building principals, school board members, and educational administrators—the people who make the day-to-day decisions about how individual students should be educated. The report can be accessed at its Web site: <http://www.nationdeceived.org>.

*A Nation Deceived* has aroused wide national and, indeed, international interest. Educators and parents are beginning to recognize that acceleration can be much more than a simple grade-skip. Teachers are beginning to consider whether bright students in their classes might possibly be candidates for some form of acceleration. Families of gifted and talented students are beginning to ask themselves, "It seems to have worked for other children—could it be an answer for ours?"

The book you are holding, written by Joan Smutny, Sally Walker, and Elizabeth Meckstroth, is intended as a practical guidebook on acceleration to assist teachers, parents, school administrators, and counselors working with gifted children in the kindergarten and primary school years. It is written in three Parts and, appropriately, it begins and ends with the children themselves—chapters in which the focus is specifically directed at the characteristics and needs of gifted students who might benefit from one or more of the 18 forms of acceleration identified in *A Nation Deceived*.

Part I examines the range of accelerative practices appropriate for use with gifted children in the kindergarten and primary school years and discusses *how* and *why* these practices work. It asks and answers the critical questions that Nick, Susan, and I found were most frequently posed about acceleration. It looks at an issue that is not often enough addressed: the use of acceleration with groups of gifted students who are traditionally underserved, such as the urban poor and twice-exceptional children. It includes a section on the critical issue of assessment.

**X** ACCELERATION FOR GIFTED LEARNERS, K-5

Part II provides a useful introduction to differentiating the curriculum by modifying content, process, and product. The provision of a developmentally appropriate curriculum is important for *all* children, not only the gifted, and for *all* gifted students, not only those who are to be accelerated, and the authors emphasize that acceleration is much more than a speedier progress through school. It must be accompanied by a curriculum designed to meet the learning needs of the individual child.

Part III covers a range of issues in social-emotional development, including the complexities of asynchrony—the many ways in which intellectually gifted students can be “out of synch” with their age peers—and also discusses family issues that may need to be considered when a child is accelerated.

Intellectually gifted children differ from their age peers of average ability in their capacity to learn, the ways in which they learn, the speed at which they learn, their feelings about learning, and their perceptions of themselves as learners. But, as the final Part of this book emphasizes, there is much more to it than that. They also differ in many aspects of their social and emotional development. They tend to be more socially and emotionally mature than their age peers. Many possess a capacity for empathy—the capacity to understand and feel, within themselves, the feelings of others—that is not usually found in children of their age. Their conceptions and expectations of friendship tend to be different from those of their age peers and more closely aligned with the friendship conceptions of older children. Even their hobbies and interests tend to be those of children some years older. Not surprisingly, many gifted children have little in common with their age peers. Many gravitate toward older children with whom they share more commonalities of interest—and commonalities of development. This developmental advancement—intellectual, academic, and emotional—is what makes gifted learners such excellent candidates for acceleration.

In an early chapter of this book, the authors quote David Elkind (2001), author of *The Hurried Child*, who pointed out that acceleration may actually be the wrong word to describe the many procedures by which a gifted child may be permitted to advance through school at a faster pace. I agree. As a driver, when I want my car to speed up, I step on what my American colleagues call the gas pedal, but which we in Australia call the accelerator. It is my decision, not the car's, to go faster—and to do so, I literally put pressure on my car to accelerate. By contrast, when, in my years as a classroom teacher and school administrator, I allowed gifted students to accelerate through school, I was *removing* the academic and social pressure that required the child to slow down her natural speed of progress. We call this “acceleration,” but what I was actually doing, in essence, was taking my foot off the brake.

Some teachers may assume that the provision of a challenging, enriched, individualized, fast-paced curriculum is the essence of acceleration and that little more is required. They would be wrong. *All* students need a challenging, enriched curriculum through which they can work at their own natural pace of learning. The essence of acceleration is, in my view, a developmentally appropriate curriculum married to a developmentally appropriate *placement*. This means placing the gifted child with other students who are at similar stages of academic and emotional maturity. Sometimes this can be accommodated in a setting in which the gifted child remains with age peers—one example given in this book is acceleration through cluster grouping—but except in a minority of cases where issues in the child's development or environmental circumstances indicate otherwise (the book provides some

thoughtfully presented examples of these), acceleration works best when the gifted student works with children who are older, either full time, as in grade advancement or early entrance, or for part of the day, as in subject acceleration.

Many teachers think of acceleration as “removing” a child from his or her natural setting, “taking her away” from her peers, or “bumping him up” a grade. These perceptions arise from a misunderstanding of the nature of acceleration and the nature of giftedness. There is nothing “natural” about keeping an academically gifted six-year-old with other six-year-olds with whom she has little or nothing in common except the chronological accident that they were all born in the same 12-month period, and insisting that she “work through” a curriculum that is developmentally suited to her classmates but that she mastered a year, or several years, before.

It is not preordained that six-year-olds must work with other six-year-olds. As Nick, Susan, and I pointed out in *A Nation Deceived*, until comparatively recently in America’s history, students progressed through school grades on the basis of their individual ability and motivation. The decision to shift away from this recognition of the individual, and to move children through school in lockstep progression based on age rather than competence, was not an educational decision; it was a management decision made by an increasingly industrialized society increasingly preoccupied with “progress.” Sadly, this “progress” stopped many gifted children in their tracks.

This book is written to assist educators and parents who want to restore to gifted students the right to progress at their natural pace of learning.

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